



A Report on Visitation Patterns and Characteristics  
of Food Pantry Clients in the United States in 2009

RESEARCH BRIEF

# Food Banks: Hunger's New Staple



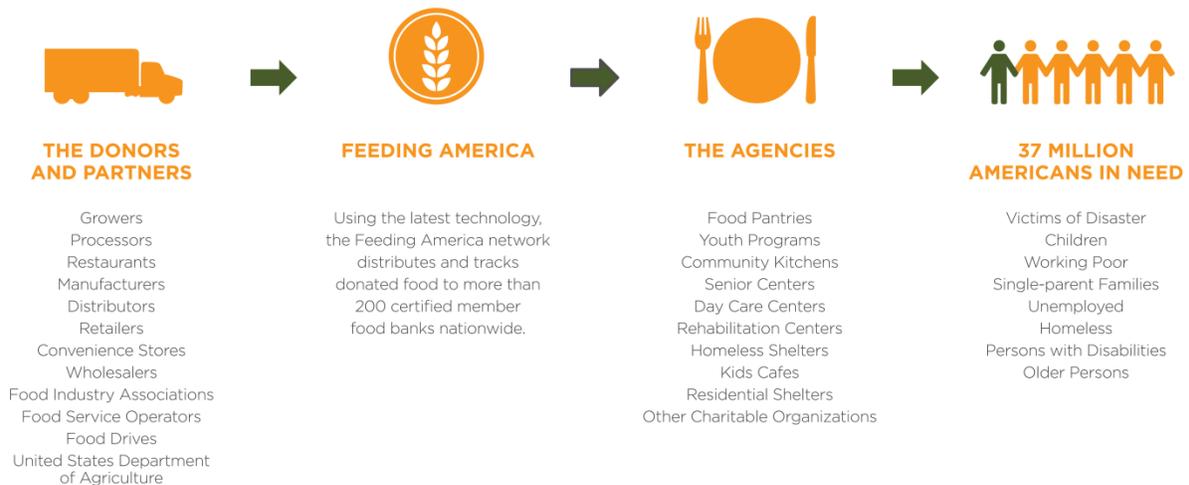


# About Feeding America

Feeding America is the nation’s largest domestic hunger-relief charity, with a network of more than 200 food banks across the country. Each year, Feeding America secures and distributes three billion pounds of food and grocery products through 61,000 agencies, including food pantries, shelters, kitchens, and youth and senior feeding programs. Our agency network provides emergency food assistance to an estimated 37 million individuals in need annually, including nearly 14 million children and nearly 3 million seniors. Feeding America food banks also work to combat hunger by connecting clients with federal nutrition programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), that can improve their ability to feed their families.

Our strength is derived from our member food banks, which serve all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, reaching nearly all metropolitan, suburban and rural communities. Hunger does not discriminate and neither does the Feeding America network—our members serve people regardless of their race, age or religion.

## How We Work



# “Emergency” Food Assistance as a Staple

The first food bank, St. Mary’s Food Bank Alliance in Arizona, was established in 1967 as a way to ensure that food was available when individuals and families experienced temporary economic setbacks. At that time, food banks and food pantries were intended to serve as an emergency source of food for individuals needing temporary assistance to meet their dietary needs. As the economic landscape has changed, so has the role of food banks and their agencies.

Feeding America member food banks have increasingly reported that many clients are no longer coming to their pantries only for short-term, emergency situations. Food assistance has become a staple for many people – those that need the extra help to make it through the month on a more consistent basis. This report, for the first time, confirms anecdotal reports from food banks by examining the reported patterns of service utilization from 61,000 client interviews nationwide captured in the 2010 *Hunger in America* study.

Findings from this new analysis of food pantry clients suggest that most families are not visiting pantries to meet temporary, acute food needs – instead, for the majority of people seeking food assistance, pantries are a part of households’ longer-term strategies to supplement monthly shortfalls in food. Low-income seniors, often limited by fixed income, are among the most consistent pantry clients.

This sustained need among many clients underscores the challenge for food banks in securing sufficient quantities of food to distribute and the need for vulnerable households to be able to access federal nutrition programs that can help stabilize their ability to feed their families. Many people do not realize that federally-funded commodity programs such as The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) are a core support for the charitable food system. TEFAP provides approximately one quarter of the food that flows through the Feeding America network and CSFP provides monthly food boxes for nearly 600,000 participants, most of whom are low-income seniors.

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## What is a Food Bank?

A food bank is a charitable organization that solicits, receives, inventories and distributes donated food and grocery products pursuant to appropriate industry and regulatory standards. The products are distributed to charitable human service agencies (e.g. food pantries), which provide the products directly to clients through various programs.

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## What is a Food Pantry?

A food pantry is a charitable distribution agency that provides clients with food and grocery products for home preparation and consumption.

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The findings also illuminate the critical role that the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly called the Food Stamp Program) plays in supplementing the food needs of low-income people. The alleviation of food insecurity is the central goal of SNAP, the largest food assistance program in the United States. SNAP provides benefits for more than 45 million low-income people struggling to meet their basic needs,<sup>1</sup> and benefits are targeted to the most vulnerable individuals, with 76 percent of households including a child, disabled person or senior.<sup>2</sup> However, this report demonstrates that low-income individuals often must combine both public and private sources of food assistance to make ends meet during periods of economic stress. For many clients, monthly SNAP benefits are not sufficient to meet their household's grocery needs and regular pantry visits have become a supplementary method of feeding their families. Additionally, millions of low-income, food-insecure families still earn too much to qualify for SNAP.

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### About Hunger in America 2010

*Hunger in America 2010* is the largest national study of emergency food assistance, and the latest in a series that has been conducted quadrennially since 1993. Through more than 61,000 face-to-face client interviews and more than 37,000 surveys of local charitable agencies, *Hunger in America 2010* captures detailed information about who is in need of emergency food assistance and their circumstances, which in turn helps charitable feeding organizations develop programs that best support families in need.

The *Hunger in America 2010* report is based on independent research conducted on behalf of Feeding America by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., a widely respected social policy research firm based in Princeton, New Jersey. The study was overseen by members of Feeding America's independent Technical Advisory Group, composed of noted social scientists, including demographers, economists, survey research specialists and statisticians (see *Acknowledgements and Credits* on page 21). This group reviewed the survey instruments, the analysis plan and the final results. The Technical Advisors' impartiality, broad range of expertise and critical oversight of the project was vital to ensuring that *Hunger in America 2010* adhered to the highest standards in survey research.

While the *Hunger in America 2010* report is based on independent research conducted for Feeding America by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.; the analysis for *Food Banks: Hunger's New Staple* was conducted by Samuel Echevarria-Cruz, Associate Professor at Austin Community College, and Robert Santos, Senior Institute Methodologist at the Urban Institute, in conjunction with the Feeding America research department.

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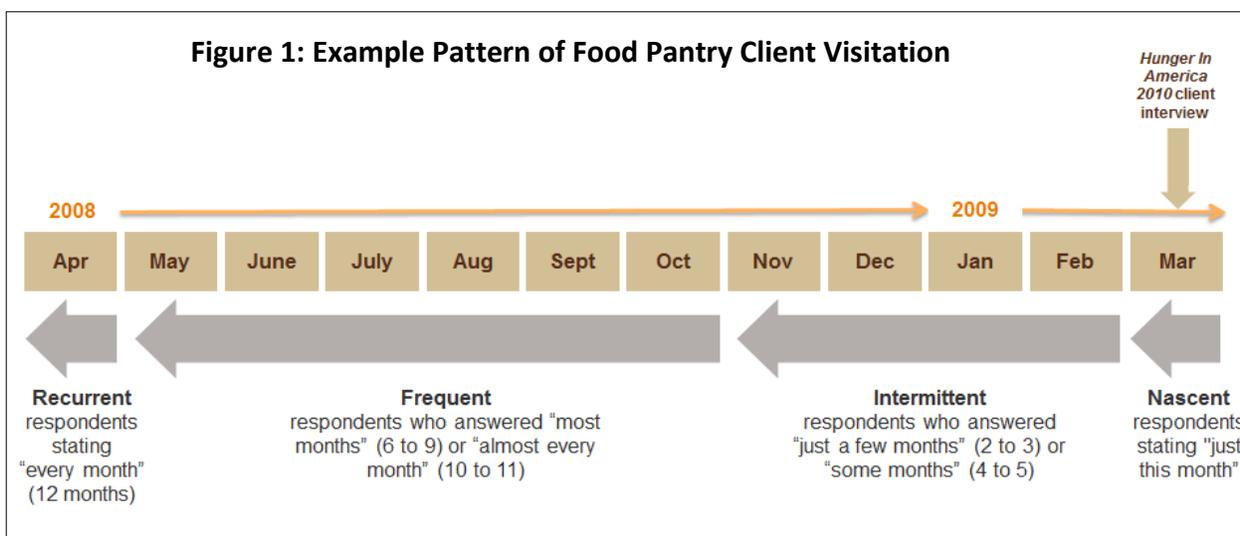
<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2011). *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation and Costs - Fiscal Year 2010*. USDA, FNS. Retrieved from <http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/SNAPsummary.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2011). *Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households – Fiscal Year 2010*. USDA, FNS. Retrieved from: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/ora/menu/published/snap/FILES/Participation/2010Characteristics.pdf>.

## Methodology

In order to better understand the frequency with which clients seek pantry services, data from the 2010 *Hunger in America* study of emergency food clients were analyzed for this report. *Hunger in America 2010* collected data from more than 61,000 interviews with clients during the winter and spring of 2009, over 42,000 of which were with food pantry clients, representing the largest study of domestic emergency food assistance ever conducted.<sup>3</sup> *Hunger in America 2010* detailed the increased need for food assistance across the nation, indicating a 46 percent increase in the number of people served by Feeding America food banks from 25 million in 2005 to 37 million in 2009. While it is critical to understand how many individual clients are being served, it is also important to examine how often those clients are seeking services in order to better grasp the nature of demand in the emergency food network.

The principal focus for the current analysis is reported patterns of food pantry visitation among pantry clients interviewed during *Hunger in America 2010*.<sup>4</sup> The following question was asked of all respondents: “Now thinking about the past year, did you or anyone in your household use a pantry...” Respondents were provided with options ranging from “every month” to “just this month.” Respondents stating that they had visited a pantry “just this month” were categorized as nascent clients. Respondents stating that they had visited a pantry “just a few months (2 to 3 months)” or “some months (4 to 5 months)” were categorized as intermittent clients. Respondents answering that they had visited “most months (6 to 9 months)” or “almost every month (10 to 11 months)” were categorized as frequent clients. Finally, respondents stating that they had visited a pantry “every month (12 months)” were categorized as recurrent clients.



<sup>3</sup> Specifically, *Hunger in America 2010* included 61,085 client interviews nationwide, of which 42,441 were with food pantry clients.

<sup>4</sup> While the *Hunger in America 2010* study examines the need for food assistance among clients visiting food pantries, shelters and soup kitchens, the *Food Banks: Hunger's New Staple* study only looks at food pantry clients. Food pantries are by far the largest client group Feeding America serves, accounting for more than 80 percent of all clients.

The data were analyzed to explore the following research questions concerning food pantry clients and their households:

- I. How are recurrent, frequent, intermittent and nascent clients different or similar from one another? What does that say about the types of programs and services that are needed by these clients?
- II. What are the characteristics of long-term recurrent and frequent food pantry clients and households? What can be said, if anything, about the clients visiting food pantries to supplement monthly shortfalls in food rather than visiting pantries only as a short-term source of food?
- III. What are the characteristics of nascent clients who reported only visiting a food pantry “just this month?” Are these clients different than other pantry clients – are they unemployed or are their benefits from SNAP or other federal programs not sufficient enough to get them through the month?
- IV. How do the experiences of food pantry clients inform what is already known about the ongoing economic crises and what are the implications for policy and service delivery?

## Data Limitations

Four categories of client pantry utilization were created in order to differentiate the frequency with which pantry clients visited a food pantry during the previous year. However, the ability to fully characterize client pantry utilization is limited by the fact that data in the *Hunger in America* study is collected at a single point in time and cannot capture the ultimate patterns of food assistance sought by newer clients. Emergency food clients likely enter and exit pantries throughout the year. Consequently, some portion of the nascent clients who report visiting a food pantry “just this month” may eventually become recurrent clients should they continue to seek emergency food “every month” in the coming year(s). Additionally, a client that started visiting a food pantry three months ago and has visited once every month since their first visit is coded as an intermittent client that has used a food pantry only 2-3 times in the last year. However, their pantry visitation pattern mimics that of a recurrent client in that they have visited the pantry for three consecutive months. There is no way to predict whether or not these clients may be at the beginning of a long-term pattern of visiting food pantries, where the survey only captures them at the onset.

This brief also explores the patterns of pantry visitation by month, and does not further explore the number of visits within a month. Although some pantries may limit clients to visiting pantry services once a month, there are other pantries that may allow clients to visit more frequently. Clients may also visit multiple pantries throughout the month. This was increasingly the case during the Great Recession, as agencies struggled to respond to growing need. Additional research is needed to understand the variety and intensity of strategies pantry clients have employed.

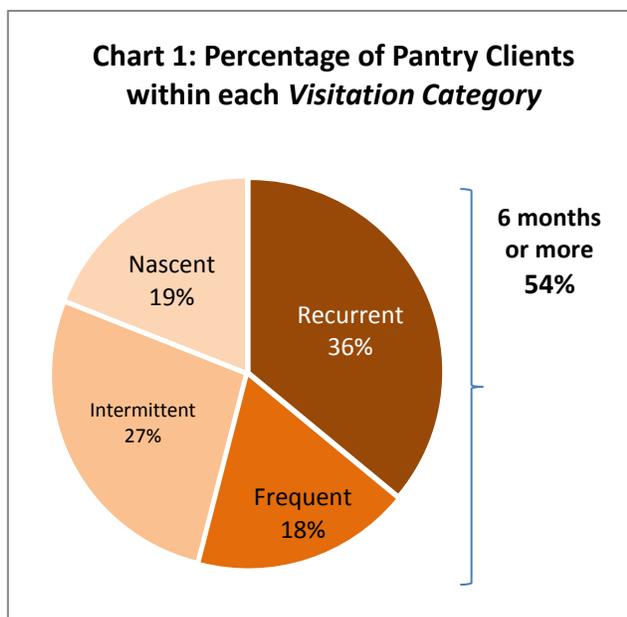
The results should also be viewed with some caution as to the exact number of months a client has visited since self-reports of service utilization are unlikely to be precise and could not be independently verified through administrative data. However, they are the best available data to date and probably represent a good directional indication of client visit patterns.

Finally, caution must be taken when interpreting descriptive statistics given the potential correlation between demographic and socioeconomic variables in the absence of multivariate statistical analyses. For example, poverty and unemployment are often correlated.

## Highlights of Key Findings

### Emergency Food as a Staple

The *Hunger in America 2010* data indicate that a majority of clients within the Feeding America network are not visiting “emergency” food assistance programs, such as food pantries, for temporary relief. Instead, these food pantries are being accessed as a consistent, supplemental food source. As illustrated in Chart 1, more than half (54 percent) of all food pantry clients visited a food pantry at least six or more months during the prior year. More than a third -- 36 percent -- of pantry clients reported visiting a pantry at least once in each month during the prior year.



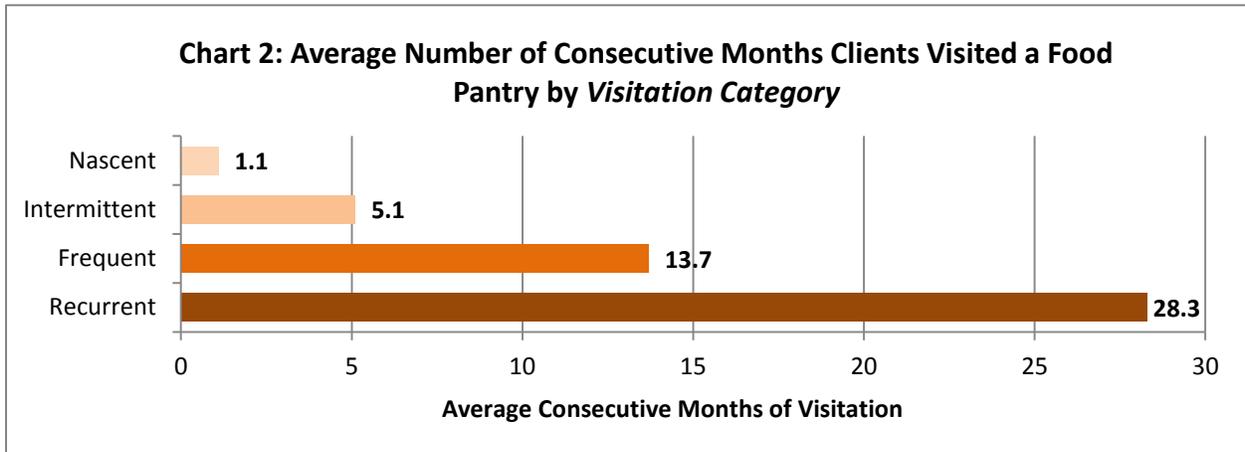
The analysis also examines the consecutive number of months all clients reported visiting a food pantry over time. In response to this question, clients could report consecutive use beyond the prior 12 months, and responses demonstrated that many recurrent clients were longer-term participants in the pantry network.

On average, recurrent clients reported having visited a food pantry every month for the prior 28 consecutive months.<sup>5</sup> The reported number of consecutive months each client group visited a pantry are illustrated in Chart 2 on page 8.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The median number of months for those visiting pantries for at least a year is slightly lower at 24 months.

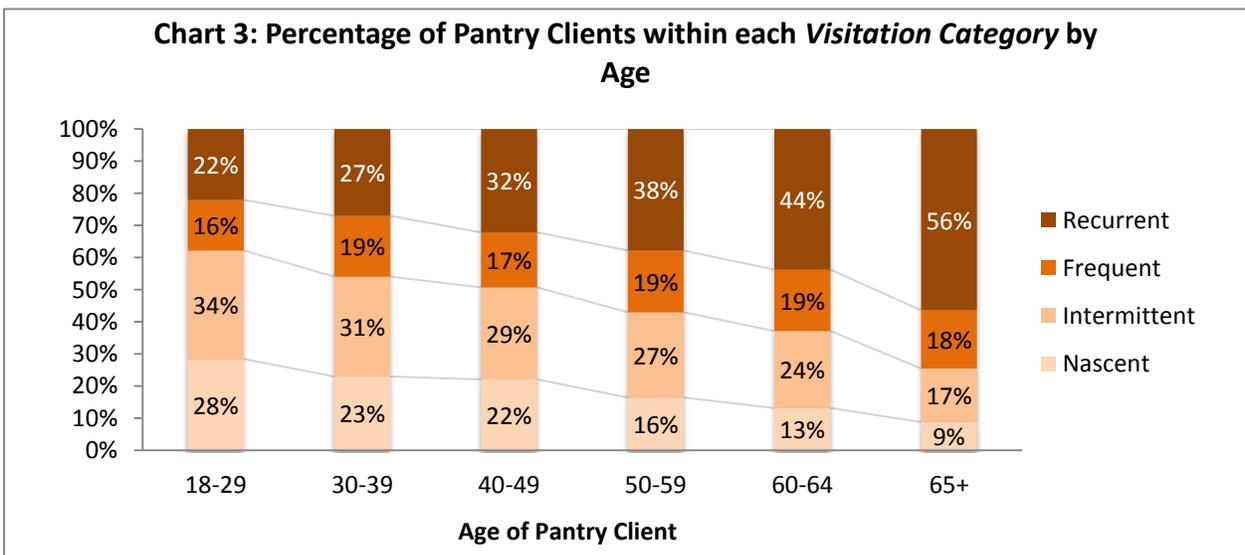
<sup>6</sup> Consecutive monthly averages over time were assessed through a separate question on consecutive months of use. In most cases, the reported number of consecutive months was consistent with the reported number of total months visiting a food pantry within the prior year but in a small number of cases it was not. Because of the small number, these cases were omitted from the analysis. The analysis and the categorization of visitation patterns are based on the reported number of months a client reported visiting a food pantry within the prior year.

These long-term visitation patterns had already begun to emerge prior to the onset of the Great Recession, indicating that many pantry clients were already struggling to meet basic household needs upon entering the Recession. These data confirm the anecdotal reports by Feeding America member food banks of fundamental, enduring changes in the role of food pantries over time; food pantries have become an ongoing part of the complex coping strategies many households employ to make ends meet each month.



## Seniors

Over half (56 percent) of senior pantry clients (65 years and older) and 44 percent of pantry clients 60 years and older served by the Feeding America network are recurrent clients – more than any other age group of clients. In contrast, only 22 percent of clients in the 18-29 age bracket are recurrent visitors to food pantries. Chart 3 shows the patterns of client visitation by age grouping, and demonstrates that the proportion of recurrent clients increases in each successive age group.



Although older adults over the age of 60 represent only 23 percent of the overall food pantry client population, they make up 33 percent of all recurrent clients. In contrast, only 13 percent of these older clients fall into the “nascent” category (those who report having visited a food pantry just the month of the interview), as compared with 19 percent of food pantry clients of all ages. It is also notable that when additional data are analyzed for all consecutive months of pantry visits, recurrent clients over the age of 65 visited food pantries for an average of 35 consecutive months, compared with just 15 months for recurrent clients aged 18-29 years. The long-term visitation patterns of older clients suggests that seniors and older adults are accessing food pantry services as an ongoing strategy in order to supplement shortfalls in their own limited resources.

## Food Pantry Visits and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

Although food pantries provide a critical source of supplemental food, the linchpin of efforts to address food insecurity in the United States is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). SNAP provides benefits for purchasing food to low-income households who meet program criteria. To be eligible for SNAP, households typically must have a gross annual income below 130 percent of the federal poverty level -- for a family of four, the 2011 threshold was \$29,055 on average.<sup>7</sup> In 2011, the average monthly household benefit was \$284, although benefits vary by household size. Approximately 41 percent of all Feeding America pantry clients reported receiving SNAP benefits at the time they were interviewed.<sup>8</sup>

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### What is SNAP?

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the Food Stamp Program, is the largest federal nutrition assistance program and the cornerstone of the federal nutrition safety net. In federal fiscal year 2011, SNAP provided benefits to approximately 45 million low-income participants. SNAP is targeted to the most vulnerable citizens, with approximately 76 percent of households containing a child, disabled person or senior and 84 percent of benefits received by these households. To be eligible for SNAP, a household of four is typically expected to have a gross annual income below 130 percent of the federal poverty level (\$29,055 in 2011) and a net annual income below 100 percent of the federal poverty level (\$22,350 in 2011). There may be additional criteria that vary at the state level; for example, regarding the amount of allowable assets or eligibility criteria specific to certain groups of recipients, such as seniors. Some states have also exercised the option to increase the gross income limit to 200% of the federal poverty level, although the federal net income level still applies.

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Clients enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) frequently seek additional help from Feeding America’s network of food

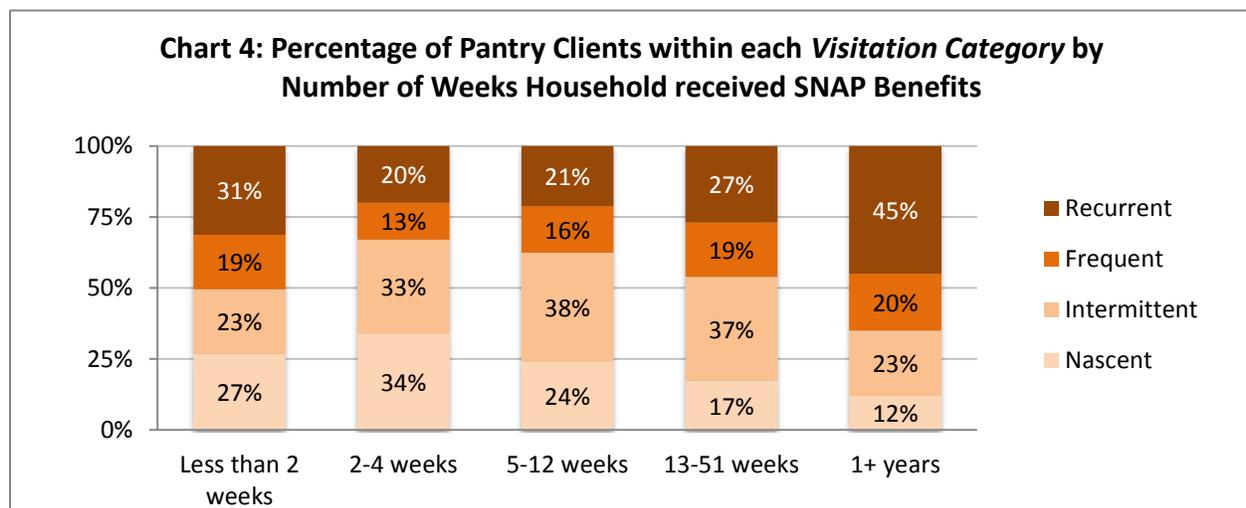
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<sup>7</sup> Households applying for SNAP also need to meet a net monthly income test and an asset test. SNAP eligibility requirements vary by state and household size. States have the option of increasing the gross income limit to up to 200% of poverty.

<sup>8</sup> Research suggests that SNAP usage is often understated in self-reported surveys, thus, the actual percentage of clients who are receiving SNAP benefits may be higher. See, for example, Bollinger, C. and M. David. “Estimation With Response Error and Nonresponse: Food Stamp Participation in the SIPP.” *Journal of Business and Economic Statistics*, 19(2), 129–142, 2001; and Gundersen, C. and B. Kreider. “Food Stamps and Food Insecurity: What can be Learned in the Presence of Nonclassical Measurement Error.” *Journal of Human Resources*, 43 (2), 352–382, 2008. However, even with underreporting, other information from food bank outreach efforts still indicate that there are clearly many food pantry clients who are eligible, but are not receiving SNAP.

banks, suggesting that for the low-income clients utilizing SNAP, these benefits coupled with clients' own resources do not go far enough in helping families meet their basic nutritional needs. Of those pantry clients currently receiving SNAP benefits, 58 percent are recurrent or frequent visitors to a food pantry.

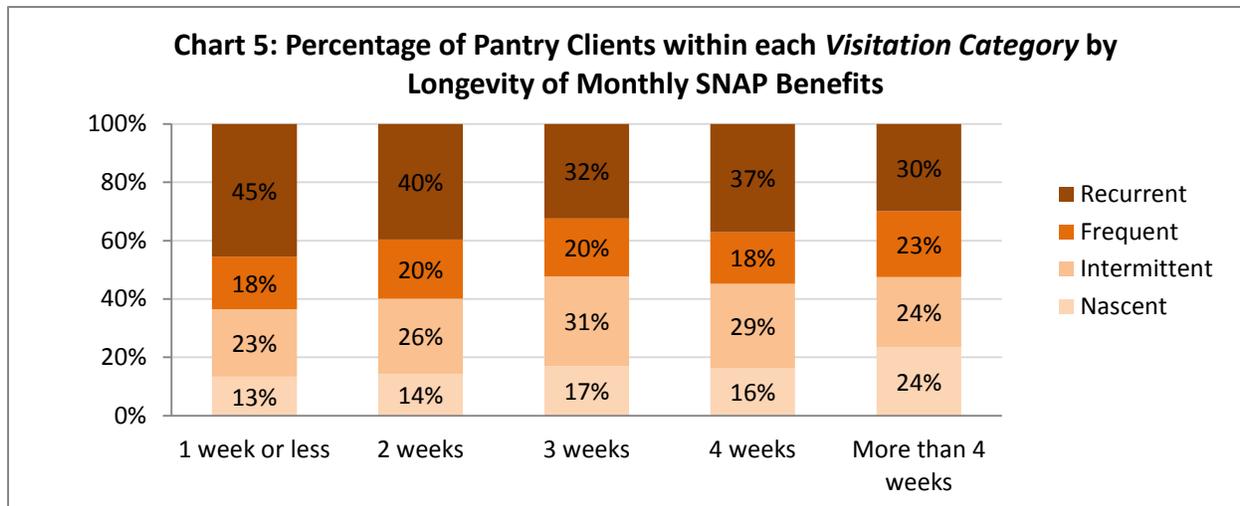
As illustrated in Chart 4, nearly half (45 percent) of the low-income pantry clients who have been receiving SNAP benefits for at least one year also visit the food pantry on a recurrent basis. New SNAP participants are more than twice as likely (27 percent) to also be new pantry clients (i.e. nascent clients) than longer-term SNAP recipients (12 percent). Households may be turning to both SNAP and food pantries as they experience longer periods of instability and finding that they continue to require both resources during sustained periods of economic difficulty.



In a separate question, pantry clients were asked how many weeks their SNAP benefits lasted during the month.<sup>9</sup> The data suggest an inverse relationship between the reported longevity of monthly SNAP benefits and the frequency of pantry visitation. In other words, pantry clients who report that their benefits run out earlier in the month are more likely to visit a pantry every month, as illustrated in Chart 5 on page 11.<sup>10</sup> This relationship highlights the importance of food pantries as a strategy for many clients who receive SNAP benefits but still are unable to make ends meet with existing resources.

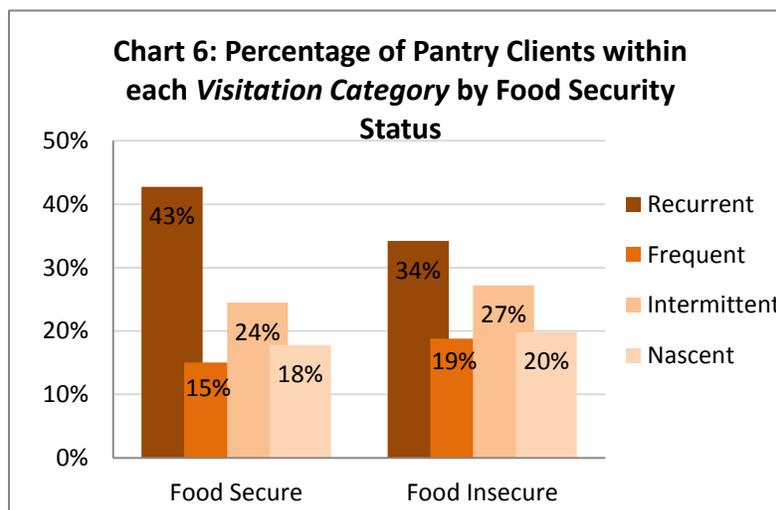
<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that SNAP benefits are not designed to provide for all the food needs of a client's household; however, identifying how long clients perceive that benefits last each month is useful in better understanding the coping strategies that households use to meet their food needs.

<sup>10</sup> The following percentages for recurrent pantry clients are statistically significantly different at the 95% confidence level across longevity of monthly SNAP benefit categories: 1 week or less vs. 3 weeks, 4 weeks and more than 4 weeks; 2 weeks vs. 3 weeks.



## Food Security

Clients are also asked a battery of six questions about their food security (see page 12 for more details on food security). These questions are the same as the validated, short-form version of the Household Food Security measure employed by the USDA. Not surprisingly, a large number of all pantry clients report being food insecure, since seeking services may be an indication of their uncertain ability to feed



their households.<sup>11</sup> However, as illustrated in Chart 6, there is a statistically significant difference in food security status for those clients visiting on a recurrent basis.<sup>12</sup>

Nearly two out of five pantry clients (43 percent) living in food secure households visit food pantries on a recurrent basis. In contrast, only 34 percent of pantry clients living in food insecure households report visiting food pantries on a recurrent basis. Without further investigation, it is difficult to conclude a great deal from these findings. It may be that newer clients are most likely to be food insecure as the result of events that prompted them to seek pantry services (e.g., economic shocks like job loss or family

<sup>11</sup> This pattern is also seen in households receiving SNAP, since those most at risk may be most likely to seek assistance. However, recent analysis by Kreider et. al (forthcoming, 2012) suggests that when controlling for dual factors of selection and measurement error, SNAP participants are less likely to be food insecure than non-participants. See Kreider, B., J. Pepper, C. Gundersen, and D. Jolliffe. "Identifying the Effects of SNAP (Food Stamps) on Child Health Outcomes When Participation is Endogenous and Misreported." *Journal of the American Statistical Association*. (Forthcoming, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Recurrent and frequent visitation categories are significantly different across food secure status at the 95% confidence level.

illness).<sup>13</sup> It is also possible that recurrent clients may be less likely to be food insecure because pantry services help to stabilize their household food security status over time. Although the analysis does not permit conclusions about the causal relationship between food security and pantry visitation, it highlights the vital role that food pantries can play in the nutritional safety net for families struggling to put food on the table.

### **What is food insecurity?**

Food insecurity is defined as a lack of access, at times, to enough nutritious food for an active, healthy life for all household members.

### **How is it measured?**

Food insecurity is a measure established by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The food security status of a household is determined by answers to 18 questions that appear in the Current Population Survey administered by the Census Bureau. A short form food security module including six questions was also developed by the USDA and was asked of food pantry clients as part of *Hunger in America 2010*. The module includes a series of questions about food not lasting in the household, the inability to afford balanced meals, eating less than one should, and going hungry or not eating for a whole day all due to lack of money. Approximately 76 percent of pantry client households were identified as food insecure. Note that the measure is not based on income and differs from the measure of poverty.

### **Why are food secure people visiting food pantries?**

Hunger in America 2010 found that 24 percent of pantry client households served are food secure. Some individuals who are experiencing financial hardship may seek services before they become food insecure as a way of coping with their situation. Some individuals may not self-identify as food insecure because the services they seek at food pantries are one of the strategies they use to maintain food security in the face of hardship.

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<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of the role of economic shocks in food insecurity, see Gundersen, C., B. Kreider, and J. Pepper. "The Economics of Food Insecurity in the United States." *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy*, v33 (3), 281-303. 2011.

## Detailed Characteristics of Food Pantry Clients



Using information collected from questions in the *Hunger in America 2010* survey enables a deeper exploration of the characteristics of the clients within each visitation pattern – recurrent, frequent, intermittent and nascent. Cross-tabulation of the frequency of client visits to food pantries with a number of other key variables provides a clearer picture of the characteristics of pantry clients. This level of data analysis can assist the Feeding America network in more fully understanding client needs and designing services to better address them in the future.

### Characteristics of Recurrent Clients

As illustrated in Chart 1 on page 7, 36 percent of pantry clients reported visiting pantries every month in the year prior to data collection. Of these recurrent clients, 41 percent state that they have been using food pantries for more than a year (as measured by consecutive months), which represents 15 percent of all pantry clients.

#### ***Individual and Household Characteristics***

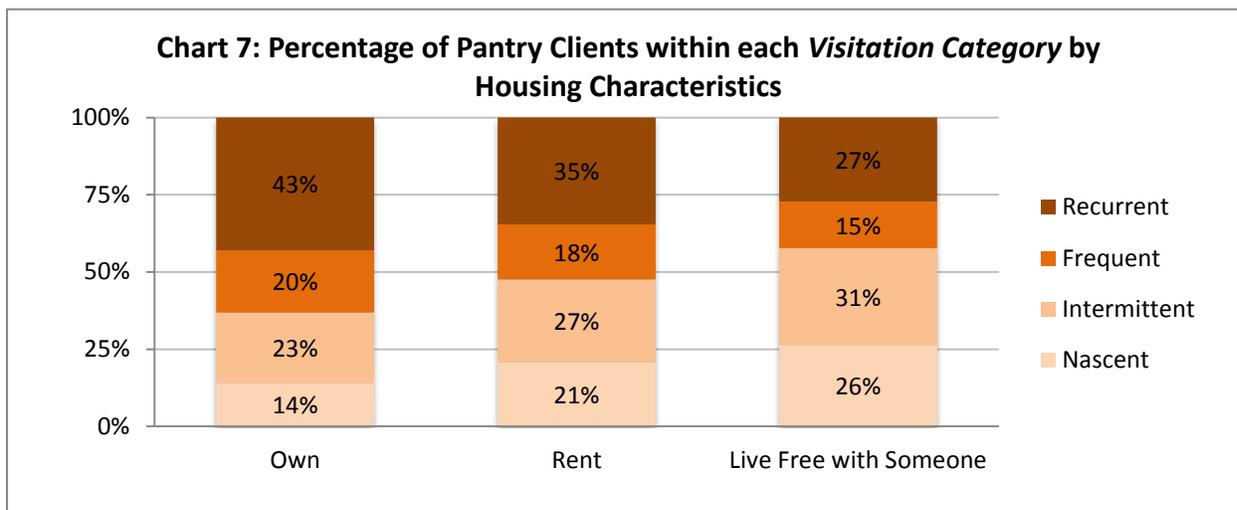
Age is an important variable that is strongly associated with visitation patterns, particularly the recurrent clients. Chart 3 on page 8 demonstrates the consistent increase in the proportion of recurrent pantry clients for every older age group. Only 22 percent of pantry clients aged 18-29 are recurrent clients, compared to 56 percent of pantry clients over the age of 65. This pattern is not as evident in any of the other frequency groups, suggesting that recurrent clients have a distinct profile and experience.

There are slight variations across frequency of visitation patterns with regard to specific demographics. For example, females represent the majority of pantry clients (67 percent) and are also slightly more likely to be recurrent clients than males. U.S. citizens also represent the overwhelming majority of respondents (88 percent) and are consequently slightly more likely to be recurrent pantry clients than non-citizens.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, pantry clients who are currently widowed or divorced, non-Hispanic white, or own their homes are more likely to visit a food pantry on a recurrent basis. A full 43 percent of recurrent pantry clients own their homes versus 14 percent of nascent clients (see Chart 7 on page 14). This finding may be linked to the strong relationship between age and food pantry visitation.<sup>15,16</sup> There

<sup>14</sup> Non-citizen clients can include legal immigrants, individuals with refugee status, trafficking victims that have been granted permanent legal residency, temporary legal residents and undocumented residents.

<sup>15</sup> According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 23 percent of individuals less than 25 years old are homeowners and 81 percent of individuals over the age of 65 are homeowners. U.S. Census Bureau, "Housing Vacancies and Home Ownership," Table 992. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/hvs.html>.

is also a relationship between health status and frequency of pantry visits; those respondents that indicate poorer levels of self-rated health are more likely to be recurrent pantry clients. Again, this is most likely related to the relationship between age and food pantry visitation, as older clients are more likely to visit pantries with greater frequency as well as to indicate poorer self-rated health.



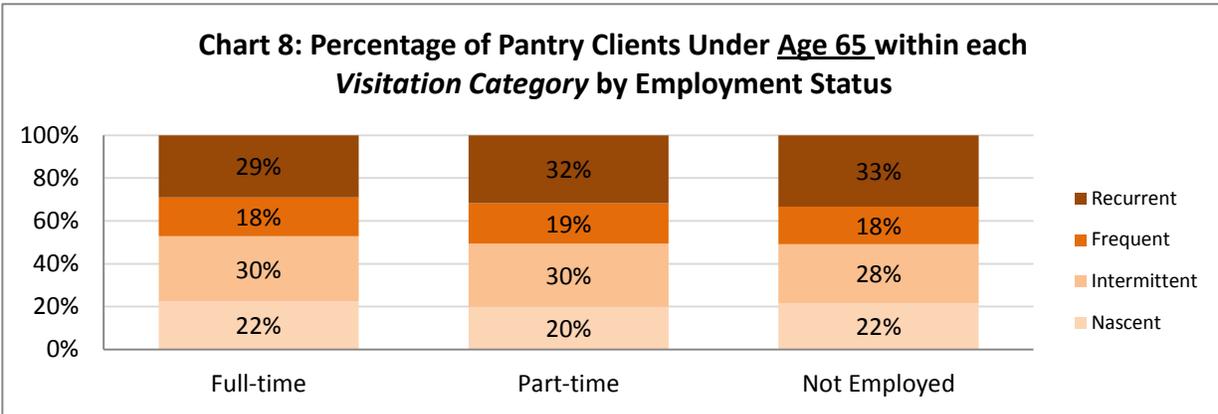
However, there may also be other factors at work – households with poor health status may struggle with more significant health expenses, which decrease resources available for food.

### ***Employment Status***

Unemployment is a significant issue for many food pantry client households. Seventy percent of all adult pantry clients under the age of 65 reported that they were unemployed. However, there is no statistically significant difference between recurrent visit patterns based on employment status (see Chart 8 on page 15). Thirty-three percent of unemployed adult pantry clients under age 65 are recurrent pantry clients while 29 and 32 percent of full-time and part-time employed adult pantry clients under the age of 65 (respectively) are recurrent clients.<sup>17</sup> The fact that there is no significant difference in employment status among recurrent clients suggests that those who are working may also be struggling with insufficient wages and hours that erode their ability to meet household needs despite their earned income.

<sup>16</sup> There is a statistically significant difference between recurrent visitation percentages across housing characteristics at the 95% confidence level.

<sup>17</sup> These differences are not statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.



### **Food Security**

Regardless of visitation patterns, the majority of all food pantry clients describe themselves as food insecure; a finding that is not surprising given that need drives people to seek services. However, as discussed in the *Highlights of Key Findings* section, pantry client households that are identified as food secure are more likely to include individuals that visit the pantry on a recurrent basis.<sup>18</sup> The recurrent client group is the only group in this analysis with a higher proportion of food-secure households than food-insecure households. As discussed earlier, this finding is difficult to interpret without more investigation. It may be that newer clients are particularly vulnerable and that is why they have recently sought pantry assistance. It is also possible that there is a “program effect” – households that obtain pantry services on a recurrent basis are better able to stabilize their food security situation. As is illustrated in Table 1, 43 percent of food secure pantry client households and 34 of food insecure pantry client households include individuals who visit a pantry on a recurrent basis. This statistically significant relationship holds true even when adjusting for the presence of seniors in the household as well as for households with and without children. The same statistically significant difference is observed irrespective of SNAP participation. However, additional analysis controlling for multiple factors is needed to further explore the reasons for this observation before drawing conclusions from this pattern.

<b>Table 1: Food security status by visitation pattern and type of household</b>					
	<b>Nascent</b>	<b>Intermittent</b>	<b>Frequent</b>	<b>Recurrent</b>	<b>Total<sup>19</sup></b>
All households					
<b>Food Secure</b>	18%	25%	15%	43%	100%
<b>Food Insecure</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>100%</b>
Households with children					
<b>Food Secure</b>	22%	29%	14%	36%	100%
<b>Food Insecure</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>100%</b>
Households with seniors					
<b>Food Secure</b>	8%	16%	17%	60%	100%
<b>Food Insecure</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>100%</b>

<sup>18</sup> This difference is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.

<sup>19</sup> Since percentages were rounded from the tenth decimal place, the sum of rows does not always total 100%.

## ***SNAP and Other Federal Nutrition Programs***

Households whose members visit food pantries on a recurrent basis are more likely to be receiving SNAP benefits for longer durations than other client categories, as discussed in the *Highlights of Key Findings* section on page 7. This is likely the reflection of the long-term need for food assistance among recurrent clients. Additionally, the fewer weeks that clients report their SNAP benefits last in a typical month, the more likely a household is to exhibit recurrent patterns of visitation (see Chart 5 on page 11). This relationship suggests that food pantries are utilized to subsidize personal resources for nutritional needs in conjunction with limited SNAP benefits.

Among those client households that have not applied for SNAP benefits yet, those that indicate that they are planning to apply are most likely to include recurrent pantry clients.

Client households that include members participating in senior nutrition programs are far more likely to include recurrent pantry clients than the national average among all

clients (69 percent of pantry client households participating in senior brown bag food programs are recurrent compared to 36 percent for all pantry client households).<sup>20</sup> This is likely due to the large proportion of seniors among recurrent clients. Conversely, client households with children in day care (either with or without government day care assistance) and households receiving WIC benefits are less likely than average to be recurrent pantry clients (between 25 percent and 28 percent for all three cases). One possible explanation for these differences is that the receipt of WIC benefits and meals children receive at day care help relieve pressure on household resources, reducing the need to seek pantry services on a regular basis. It is also possible that families with infants and young children may find it more difficult to make time to visit their local food pantry every month and may instead rely on pantries in those months with the most critical need, rather than as a regular coping strategy.

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### **What is the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)?**

WIC provides federal grants to states for supplemental foods, health care referrals, and nutrition education for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and non-breastfeeding postpartum women, and to infants and children up to age five who are found to be at nutritional risk.

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## **Characteristics of Intermittent and Frequent Clients**

Intermittent clients are respondents who have visited a food pantry in two to five of the 12 months prior to the time of data collection. Frequent clients are those who visited a food pantry between six and eleven months of the 12 months prior to the time of data collection.

The general trends among intermittent clients are similar in many dimensions to those of nascent clients, described in the following section. Although this assumption is based on descriptive, cross-sectional data, it seems that clients with this visitation pattern have more fundamental differences from recurrent clients than from nascent clients.

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<sup>20</sup> All recurrent senior nutrition program percentages are significantly different from overall recurrent pantry clients at the 95% confidence level.

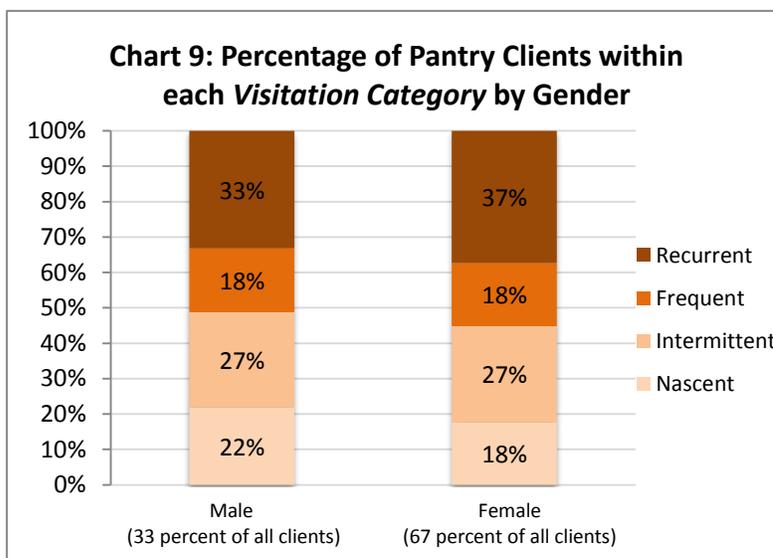
Frequent pantry clients are more difficult to characterize given their “halfway” status between nascent and recurrent pantry clients. With a period of visitation spanning two to six months, this demographic may include a mixed group of profiles that is difficult to differentiate in the context of the point-in-time data available through the *Hunger in America 2010* survey. Longitudinal research would be helpful in understanding how client food security challenges change over time and whether it is possible to predict which client households are most likely to need ongoing support in the future.

## Characteristics of Nascent Clients

Approximately 19 percent of all clients were categorized as nascent: the month of data collection was their first month visiting a food pantry within the prior 12 months (see Figure 1 on page 5). Their future visitation patterns are unknown, as are their experiences prior to 12 months before data collection. It is also possible that some proportions of these “nascent” clients are long-term infrequent clients of food pantry services. For the present study, nascent clients are distinguished as those who have not visited food pantries consistently within the past year compared to the other three groups. However, there is reason to believe that these clients are truly new (as opposed to lapsed former clients) to sampled food pantry sites given their congruent responses on other survey questions. As illustrated in Chart 2 (on page 8), clients were also asked, in a separate question, the number of consecutive months they visited a food pantry in the past.<sup>21</sup> On average, nascent clients report visiting food pantries for 1.1 consecutive months, providing further evidence that these clients are actually new to the food pantry system.

### Individual and Household Characteristics

As discussed in the *Highlights of Key Findings* and *Recurrent Client Characteristics* sections, there is a positive correlation between increased age and increased frequency of visits to a food pantry among recurrent clients (see Chart 3 on page 8). In contrast, among nascent clients, there is an inverse relationship between age and frequency of visits. The highest



<sup>21</sup> Consecutive monthly averages over time were assessed through a separate question on consecutive months of use. In most cases, the reported number of consecutive months was consistent with the reported number of total months visiting a food pantry within the prior year but in a small number of cases it was not. Because of the small number, these cases were omitted from the analysis. The analysis and the categorization of visitation patterns are based on the reported number of months a client reported visiting a food pantry within the prior year.

proportion of nascent pantry clients (28 percent) is found among the youngest age group (age 18-29).<sup>22</sup> On the other end of the spectrum, the lowest proportion of nascent pantry clients (9 percent) is found among the oldest age group (age 65 and older).

With regards to other individual demographic characteristics, there are slight variations across frequency of visitation patterns that illuminate other dimensions of nascent pantry clients. For example, males are slightly more likely to be nascent clients than females – 22 percent of all male pantry clients are nascent visitors versus 18 percent of female pantry clients (see Chart 9 on page 17).<sup>23</sup> Non-citizens are likewise slightly more likely to be nascent pantry clients – 26 percent of all non-citizen pantry clients are nascent as compared to 18 percent of clients with U.S. citizenship.<sup>24</sup>

As previously mentioned, the biggest contrast in relationship status between nascent and recurrent clients can be found among those who are widowed. Only 14 percent of pantry clients who are widowed are nascent clients while 48 percent of pantry clients who are widowed are recurrent clients. These findings are likely a result of the strong relationship between visitation frequency and age.

When looking at housing patterns, the small proportion of pantry clients who are living in more transitory environments (motel/hotel or living with family/friends) are most likely to be nascent clients.<sup>25</sup> According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of young people living in “doubled up” households has increased significantly since the Recession.<sup>26</sup> As more people struggle to find work, they may choose to share a home with friends or family in order to cope with unemployment and economic stress. It is possible that as a result, more households are turning to the emergency food system in order to help absorb the impact of increasing household size.

With respect to health status and health insurance participation, nascent pantry clients are most likely to report excellent or very good health status among the four groups, which may be related to their relatively younger age distribution. However, they are also most likely among the four groups to report that they are uninsured.

## **Employment Status**

Nascent clients are slightly more likely to be from households where the adults are employed full-time than other client groups, although the difference is not statistically significant.<sup>27</sup> There are some interesting directional findings with respect to monthly household income, although absolute levels of self-reported income cannot be interpreted with confidence without additional verification.

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<sup>22</sup> There is a statistically significant difference between the youngest age group (age 18-29) of nascent clients and the following other nascent client age groups above age 50: (50-59, 60-64, and older than age 65) at the 95% confidence level.

<sup>23</sup> This difference is significant at the 95% confidence level.

<sup>24</sup> Non-citizen clients can include legal immigrants, individuals with refugee status, trafficking victims that have been granted permanent legal residency, temporary legal residents and undocumented residents.

<sup>25</sup> Only those clients who are living in a motel/hotel are statistically significantly different from all other housing statuses at the 95% confidence level.

<sup>26</sup> DeNavas-Walt, C., Proctor, B.D., & Smith, J.C. (2011). *Poverty, Income, and Health Insurance in the United States: 2010*. U.S. Census Bureau.

<sup>27</sup> This difference is not statistically significant.

Nascent pantry visitation rates are highest for those making no income. Over 29 percent of pantry clients without any income last month are nascent clients. However, when looking at *previous* annual household incomes, nascent visitation rates are highest for those pantry client households with an annual income of \$40,000 or more<sup>28</sup> – 33 percent of all pantry clients reporting previous annual income at this level were nascent clients. These findings support anecdotal reports from food banks and agencies regarding the increasing population of newly unemployed clients. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, between June 2007 and June 2009, the unemployment rate increased from 4.5 percent to 9.5 percent and the number of unemployed persons rose to 14.7 million people. As people become unemployed and lose their primary source of income, they may seek out a food pantry in order to help cope with their new economic circumstances.

Furthermore, when looking at the poverty ratio based on annual household incomes across all pantry clients, client households with incomes above 185 percent of the federal poverty level are most likely to fall in the nascent category.<sup>29</sup> Household income above this level frequently renders these families ineligible for most government food assistance programs. Among pantry client households with annual incomes above 185 percent of the federal poverty level, 32 percent exhibit nascent visitation patterns compared to 22 percent of clients who exhibit recurrent visitation patterns. These individuals may be struggling with recent income shocks related to the Recession or other household changes.

### ***Food Security***

Client households that are identified as food secure are less likely to include nascent pantry clients (18 percent) than recurrent clients (43 percent), as illustrated in Chart 6 (on page 11). Additionally, when comparing the food security status of nascent pantry clients, these households are slightly more likely to be food insecure. For example, 20 percent of all food insecure client households include nascent clients while only 18 percent of all food secure client households include nascent clients.

### ***SNAP and Other Federal Nutrition Programs***

In terms of SNAP participation, clients who are new SNAP recipients are more likely to be nascent visitors than clients from households that have been receiving SNAP benefits for longer periods of time. Among pantry clients who have only been receiving SNAP benefits for the last 2-4 weeks, 34 percent are nascent clients, while only 20 percent are recurrent clients, suggesting that they may have experienced more recent economic disadvantage. Client households that have not applied to SNAP are also more likely to include nascent pantry clients. Among those households that have not applied, “social stigma” was the most commonly cited reason for non-application (30 percent). Client households with children in day care are also more likely than other client households to include nascent clients. As noted in earlier discussion, it may be that client households that have access to other options for food assistance,

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<sup>28</sup> It is important to note that only 1.3 percent of all pantry clients reported a household income above \$40,000.

<sup>29</sup> Nascent client households with incomes above 185 percent of the federal poverty level are significantly different than other nascent client households with incomes below 185 percent of the federal poverty level. This difference is not significant for households with no income. It should be noted that only about 7% of all pantry clients reported annual incomes above 185% of the poverty level.

such as WIC or daycare-based meals, may be more likely to use pantries only at the most critical times. Additional research is needed to better understand the interactions between these programs and how they influence household decisions to seek pantry services.

## Policy Implications

The findings in *Food Banks: Hunger's New Staple* reveal that, for many clients of the Feeding America network, food pantries have become a critical supplementary source of food for their households on an ongoing basis. In light of Congress' continued focus on deficit reduction and reducing federal spending, as well as the expected reauthorization of certain federal nutrition programs in the 2012 Farm Bill, the policy implications of these findings are serious and immediate – not only for the 37 million people served through the Feeding America network, but also for the nearly 49 million people struggling with food insecurity across the country.

The protracted economic downturn has created a perfect storm for food banks, their partner agencies and clients seeking food assistance. Demand for charitable food assistance is at an all-time high while many of the food sources that generally stock pantry shelves are in decline.<sup>30</sup> Rising food and gas prices put pressure on family budgets and also make it costlier for food banks and pantries to serve their clients. Additionally, spending on low-income assistance programs has been reduced in many states and federal programs face the prospect of cuts.

Between the *Hunger in America 2006* and *Hunger in America 2010* studies, the number of clients served by the Feeding America network increased by 46 percent.<sup>31</sup> Although the end of the great recession is officially dated as June 2009, continued high rates of unemployment and poverty mean that food banks continue to see extraordinary demand. In addition, a number of food banks report that underemployment has contributed to pressures on families' abilities to meet household needs.<sup>32</sup> The increased need for assistance is likely to continue for many years, until our economy has fully recovered.

Analysis of household food insecurity trends over the past decade in Feeding America's *Map the Meal Gap* highlight that unemployment and poverty rates are the most important factors influencing food insecurity.<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately, the prognosis for both unemployment and poverty trends is not encouraging. Unemployment projections from the Office of Management and Budget and the Congressional Budget Office predict that unemployment will not return to pre-recession levels before

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<sup>30</sup> *Hunger in America 2010*. (2010). Feeding America.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Although documentation of underemployment is challenging, typical measures include individuals who report that they are working part-time involuntarily or want to have a job, although not currently looking for work. Sum and Khatiwada (2010) reported that the number of underemployed jumped 112% between 2007-2009. Estimates of labor underutilization reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics showed that the January 2012 seasonally adjusted rate of unemployment was 8.3%, while the underemployment rate (both unemployed and underemployed) was 14.9%. See <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empst.t15.htm>.

<sup>33</sup> Gundersen, C. et al. (2011). *Map the Meal Gap*. Feeding America.

the end of 2019. Additionally, even those who return to work may not be able to find the quality of jobs needed to achieve to self-sufficiency.<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, analysis of the impact of these sustained unemployment levels suggests that by 2014, there may be more than 10 million additional people with incomes below the federal poverty level. The already high child poverty rate is projected to increase to more than 1 in 4 children.<sup>35</sup> In light of these sobering projections, the charitable feeding network must prepare to face significant challenges for the next several years.

Even while demand for emergency food assistance remains at unprecedented levels, federal commodities -- the source of about 25 percent of the food moving through Feeding America's network -- have declined significantly. Between federal fiscal years 2010 and 2011, the amount of food commodities available to food banks through TEFAP dropped by nearly 30 percent.<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, programs vital to households struggling with food insecurity such as TEFAP, SNAP -- the cornerstone of the federal nutrition assistance safety net, CSFP and WIC have been targeted for significant and harmful budgetary cuts despite the fact that need for food assistance remains high in communities across the country. Reductions in these programs could significantly increase the pressure on food banks and pantries, many of which are already struggling to meet unprecedented levels of demand.

As the current analysis suggests, households in need often rely on multiple strategies to access the food they need, including visiting food pantries, receiving SNAP benefits and accessing other federal nutrition programs targeted to vulnerable populations, such as the WIC and school-based meal programs. Even with this help, families often find themselves choosing between food and other critical household expenses, such as rent, mortgage payments and utility bills, highlighting the fact that food insecurity is a consequence of broader economic vulnerability. Thus, these new data underscore the need for strong efforts to protect the federal nutrition programs and other critical safety net initiatives that help low-income families struggling to meet basic needs.<sup>37</sup>

Effectively addressing food insecurity requires a strong public-private partnership. As important as the charitable network is, charity alone cannot meet the sustained high need for emergency food assistance. Federal safety net programs like SNAP, TEFAP, CSFP and WIC are essential.

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<sup>34</sup> Bernhardt, A. (2011). *The Good Jobs Deficit: A Closer Look at Recent Job Loss and Jobs Growth Trends Using Occupational Data*. The National Employment Law Project. Retrieved from <http://www.nelp.org/page/-/Final%20occupations%20report%207-25-11.pdf?nocdn=1>

<sup>35</sup> Monea, E. & Sawhill, I. (2011). *An Update to "Simulating the Effect of the 'Great Recession' on Poverty"*. The Brookings Institution. [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/reports/2011/0913\\_recession\\_poverty\\_monea\\_sawhill/0913\\_recession\\_poverty\\_monea\\_sawhill.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/reports/2011/0913_recession_poverty_monea_sawhill/0913_recession_poverty_monea_sawhill.pdf).

<sup>36</sup> Feeding America analysis of USDA data

<sup>37</sup> Hunger in America 2010. (2010). Feeding America.

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